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Lincoln Centennial Address

Delivered by Jesse Holdom
Before the West End Woman's Club, Chicago
February 12, 1909



Compliments of
JESSE HOLDOM

LINCOLN CENTENNIAL ADDRESS

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ODAY President Roosevelt, with impressive ceremonies, in the presence of many distinguished Americans, is laying the corner stone of the Lincoln Memorial Building, an architecturally beautiful edifice on a commanding site at Hodgenville, Kentucky, which will inclose and forever preserve the lonely log cabin where the great Lincoln first saw the light of day.

What shall I say to you today about Lincoln? What can I say that has not already been better said? Lincolnian literature is bewildering for its immensity. All, however, that has ever been written about Lincoln is interesting to every lover of his country. And who has not read and re-read of the wonderful attainments and work of this great historical character? Had I been commanded to tell you something new about Lincoln, something not very generally known, I should have declined the task. So, while what I may say to you is but the old, old story of Lincoln, still, as you love and admire him and glory in what he achieved for the permanent good of our race and country, you will gladly listen, with cheerful hearts, to whatever I may say, no matter how well such incidents as I shall recite may linger in your memory.

Lincoln is admired, by the great majority for his qualities of heart, his humor, his kindness and his

humanity. He detested war and carnage; to him they were hideous; but while he suffered heart aches throughout the war, yet he endured it and persevered with it to a successful conclusion for the Union which it preserved and the lasting peace which he, great soul that he was, knew would follow in its wake.

Lincoln was blessed with the priceless boon of a good mother. She gave him as a birthright a sound, rugged physical constitution and a well poised mind, equal to cope with the great problems and to solve the many difficulties which came to him in his remarkable national career. She died all too soon, leaving her boy to sincerely mourn her untimely taking away. Lincoln's estimate and love of his mother, who fostered in him his fondness of reading and thirst for knowledge, may be judged from his saying: "I owe all that I am or hope to be to my sainted mother." Another good woman came into his life when his easy-going father took unto himself a new wife in the person of the Widow Johnston, whom Tom Lincoln had known as Sally Bush when they were girl and boy together. She brought refinement to the Lincoln home, improved much the family style of living, and, above all, gave her mother love to the motherless boy. The new mother took an especial liking to this interesting lad, and he returned her affection in full measure. She encouraged him to study and aided him with his books. She was a noble woman and a model stepmother, and deserves to have her memory kept in honor by the American people.

Lincoln had several affairs of the heart. Ann Rutledge was his first love, and their troth was plighted. But grim death snatched the fair young woman away, and Lincoln in his grief and despair exclaimed: "I

never can be reconciled to have the snow, rain and storms beat upon her grave." Mary Owens was his next flame, but Lincoln was bashful and diffident, and he lost her. But he soon after met his fate by marrying Mary Todd, a Kentucky belle. This Mary had two strings to her bow. She was educated, refined and ambitious, and had said in her girlhood days she would marry a man who would be President. She married the right man to gratify that ambition when she took Lincoln for her husband, notwithstanding, it is said that one evening at a Springfield ball Lincoln approached her, saying, "Miss Todd, I should like to dance with you the worst way." After making a painful progress around the ball room, with her rather awkward and far from graceful partner, she sat down, and a girl friend who had heard Lincoln's invitation and watched the pair as they danced, said, "Well, Mary, did he dance with you the worst way," to which she replied, "Yes, the very worst."

Lincoln was as homely in his habits, as careless of his personal appearance, as any man who ever lived and attained distinction of the first order. He put on no style and assumed no airs. It is said that "he was his own wood chopper, hostler, stable boy and cow boy, clear down to, and even beyond the time he was President elect of the United States." In affirmance of his utter oblivion to conventionality, an author informs us that "in Winter an old gray shawl was wrapped about his neck. His hat had no nap, his boots were unblackened, his clothes unbrushed; he carried a dilapidated carpet bag for legal papers, a folded green umbrella with the knob gone, a string tied about the middle, and the name 'A. Lincoln' cut out of white muslin in large letters and sewed on the inside. He always wore short trousers

and usually a short circular blue coat, which he got in Washington in 1849, and kept for ten years, and which, like his vest, hung very loosely on his frame. He slept in a warm yellow flannel shirt, which came half way between his knees and his ankles. The changes which gradually took place in his dress, which reached its greatest elegance in his Presidency, were slight and marked no decrease in his own innocence about appearances, the improvements being usually suggested to him by his wife and friends. Lying on the floor in his shirt sleeves was a favorite attitude for reading. As he had no library, and the parlor, with its sofa, six haircloth chairs and marble table strewn with gift books in blue and gilt, expressed not his spirit, but his wife's, he often chose the hall for his recumbent study; and if women happened to call, Lincoln would go to the door attired as he was, and promise that he 'would trot the women folks out.'"

This unconventional man, however, was an indulgent parent, seemingly unwilling to cross his children in anything, and would romp with them upon the floor and was fond of taking walks with them and accompanying them to light entertainments, such as minstrel and magic lantern shows. Yet the tender-hearted parent, in the trial of a cause, was "hurtful in denunciation and merciless in castigation," as many a dishonest litigant found to his cost.

In the trial of a law suit it was admitted generally by the bar that Lincoln was "as wise as a serpent," but by no means "as harmless as a dove."

As a story teller he was inimitable, and on circuit he was the life of the judges and the lawyers alike, and would oftentimes keep them in roars of laughter with

his stories, until the early hours of the morning. He was good to the poor litigant with a just cause, and many a wrong he has righted in the forum of the law without compensation—purely in the interest of justice and right.

In dilating once upon what he termed the physico-mental peculiarity of his opponent, who was noisy but not profound, he said the lawyer reminded him of a little steamboat that used to bustle and puff and wheeze about in the Sangamon river. It had a five-foot boiler and a seven-foot whistle, and every time it whistled the boat stopped.

Judge Davis once fined the clerk of his court for disturbing him by laughing out loud while a trial was in progress. After court the Judge asked the clerk why he laughed so immoderately. He answered that he couldn't help it, he laughed at Lincoln's story. The Judge asked him to tell him the story, which he did, and Judge Davis was so amused himself that he remitted the fine. Lincoln once said, "The Lord must love the common people; that's why he made so many of them." At another time, "Take all the Bible upon reason that you can, and the balance on faith, and you will live and die a better man," and, "If all that has been said in praise of woman were applied to the women of America, it would not do them justice for their conduct during this war. God bless the women of America."

Lincoln's sympathetic ear was ever sensible to the cry of distress. Those in trouble found in him a helpful friend. Many a poor woman, in the depths of despair, interceding with Lincoln for husband or son, withdrew from his presence with a heart freed from trouble, her desires granted. A general once reproached the President for his exercise of the pardoning power, saying,

"Why do you interfere? Congress has taken from you all the responsibility." Lincoln replied, "Yes, Congress has taken the responsibility and left the women to howl about me." Once he wrote to the officer in charge of the Adjutant General's office: "On this day Mrs. ——— called upon me. She is the wife of Major ———. She wants her husband made a brigadier general. She is a saucy little woman, and I think she will torment me until I have to do it," and the sequel shows she succeeded.

General McClellan paraded his army up and down the Potomac, a magnificent body of men, but seemed very loath to engage the enemy. Lincoln's patience was sorely tried at continued inactivity, and one day he said to a General, "Tell McClellan if he is not going to use the army, he might lend it to me." On some one remarking to him that General McClellan was a great engineer, he retorted, "Yes, a stationary engineer."

It has been said that "when the time comes that a just biography of Abraham Lincoln can be written and read, we shall miss nothing of the human heart, the gentle patience, the all embracing sympathy which we see today. But with these qualities we shall see an intellect at once brilliant and profound; a brain that kept its own counsel, because it had looked forth with sober gaze and seen that its own counsel was best."







